

Howard University, Founders Library  
2400 Sixth Street, N.W.  
Washington  
District of Columbia

HABS No. DC-364

HABS,  
DC,  
WASH  
236A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey  
Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service  
Department of the Interior  
Washington, D.C. 20243

## HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

HABS No. DC-364

## HOWARD UNIVERSITY, FOUNDERS LIBRARY

Location: Howard University campus, 2400 Sixth Street N.W.  
Washington, D.C.

USGS Washington West Quadrangle, Universal Transverse  
Mercator Coordinates: 18.324890.3409870.

Present Owner: Howard University.

Present Use: Library.

Significance: Founders Library, the most dominant building of the elevated Howard University campus, is one of the more noticeable landmarks on Washington's skyline. Built during a period of great expansion of the Howard campus, the building was one of the most costly of the New Deal-financed academic buildings of the Depression era.

Founders Library ranks with the best of American academic buildings designed in the Georgian style. It is an early indication of the ability of black architects to design nobly when given sufficient funding, an opportunity that rarely came the way of minority architects of that era.

The visual dominance of Founders Library is appropriate for Howard University, long known for its academic excellence and commitment to the needs of the Afro-American community.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

## A. Physical History:

1. Dates of erection: 1934-1939. The plans, dated Sept. 1, 1934, received final approval from the U. S. Department of the Interior on October 15, 1934. The Library was dedicated on May 25, 1939.
2. Architect: The design of the structure came from the office of Albert I. Cassell, a black architect who was at that time Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds of Howard University and also the principal of his own architectural firm.

Cassell, born in Towson, Maryland, in 1895, was awarded the Bachelor of Arts in Architecture by Cornell University in 1919, his education having been interrupted by wartime service as an army officer. In 1920 he came to teach in the newly expanded architecture program at Howard University, and in 1921 began a three-year chairmanship of the program.

Other well-trained young black architects, notably Howard H. Mackey and Hilyard R. Robinson, joined the department, and in 1924 Cassell became Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds and began implementing his "Twenty Year Plan for the Physical Development of the Campus." Cassell chose the Georgian style for the new buildings, which were the first on the campus designed by black architects. Cassell's Howard projects included the old Home Economics and Dining Hall Building of 1921; the gymnasium, armory, and atheletic field completed in 1924; the School of Medicine, 1927; and Sojourner Truth, Prudence Crandall and Julia Caldwell Frazier dormitories completed in 1931. In 1935 the Chemistry Building and Frederick Douglass Memorial Hall were completed. His final and most noteworthy building was Founders Library.

Before the completion of Founders, Cassell became involved in an acrimonious dispute with the President of Howard which led to Cassell's severance from the University in 1937.

Cassell's other commissions included the Masonic Temple at 1000 U Street, N.W., the Margaret Murray Vocational School at First and O Streets, N.W., and a dormitory at Morgan College in Baltimore. Mayfair Mansions, "a luxurious 595 unit Negro housing development" financed by the celebrated Elder Lightfoot Michaux and his Church of God, was designed by Cassell in 1942. [Constance McLaughlin Green, The Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation's Capital (Princeton, New Jersey, 1967), p. 239.] Late in his career he designed two public schools in the District --- Kimball and Birney --- and served from 1960 to 1963 as an architectural consultant and supervisor of construction for the Catholic Diocese of Washington.

In 1935 Cassell began elaborate plans for a planned, self-sustaining community, to be called Chesapeake Heights, in Calvert County, Maryland. It would have predated places such as Columbia, Maryland. Due to a failure to secure adequate financing, the concept was still floundering at the time of Cassell's death in 1969.

Even though the design of Founders Library came from the office of Albert I. Cassell, credit for the actual design must be given to another black architect, Louis E. Fry, Sr. Fry, born in Bastrop, Texas, in 1903, received a B. S. degree in architecture from Kansas State University in 1927. From then until 1930 he taught architecture and served as college architect at Prairie View College, Texas (from which he had received a prior B. S. degree in 1922).

In the meantime, in 1929-1930, he returned to Kansas State to do Master's work in architecture. The Head of the Kansas State architecture program, having suggested to Fry that it would be good experience to work in someone else's office, talked with the chairman of Cornell University's architecture department who then contacted Albert I. Cassell, a Cornell alumnus. Thus it was that Fry came to Washington to work in Cassell's private practice. He was to replace as job captain and designer Hilyard R. Robinson (see HABS No. DC-360) who had resigned to tour Europe.

Fry states emphatically that Cassell was not the designer of any of the Howard University buildings. However, Cassell always assumed responsibility for the specifications. In the case of Founders Library, Fry was responsible for the design and for the construction documents. Fry also indicated that the architectural drawings were executed by a group of black architects who, because of the Depression, had been laid off from their work with the school department of New York City. Specifically these men were Cyril Bow, I. D. Fannin, Ralph Vaughn, Clinton Harris, and John Brent (the son of Calvin Brent, see HABS No. DC-359).

Fry left Cassell's employment in 1934 to become college architect and a faculty member at Tuskegee Institute. Later he taught at Lincoln University, Missouri. In 1947 he came to Howard University as Professor of Architecture, and soon afterwards formed the architectural firm of Fry and Welch in conjunction with John E. Welch, a fellow Howard faculty member. When Welch became Dean at Tuskegee Institute, he formed a southern branch of the firm. One of the noteworthy structures of the firm is the chapel at Tuskegee for which Paul Rudolph was associate architect.

Fry is one of the eight black Fellows of the American Institute of Architects. His son, Louis E. Fry Jr., is also a Fellow, and has succeeded his father as head of the Fry and Welch firm. In a joint venture with Andrew Bryant Associates, the firm has recieved the commission to update Founders Library and to design an addition to it.

3. Original and subsequent owners: The library is an integral part of the Howard University property which was established on the site in 1867.

B. Historical Events and Persons Connected with the Structure:

Symbolic of the importance of Founders Library was the selection of Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior and one of the key figures of the New Deal era, to deliver the dedication address on May 25, 1939. Ickes was also Patron ex officio of the federally funded University, and in his address "stressed the fact that this building, which conforms in every detail to the canons of library technique, inside and out, was planned and constructed by a Negro architect." (New York Sun, June 2, 1939)

Over the years countless noted faculty members and students who have become outstanding scholars and professionals have used its facilities. The Moorland-Spingarn Research Center of the Library contains one of the outstanding collections of scholarly material related to the experience of blacks throughout the world.

C. Sources of Information:

1. Architect's drawings: These are in the possession of the Director of Architectural and Engineering Services, Howard University.
2. Ethridge, Harrison M. "The Black Architects of Washington, D.C., 1900-Present." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., 1979. Pp. 38-39, 41-42, 53-57 and p. 87.
3. Material concerning Louis E. Fry Sr. was obtained through his son, Louis E. Fry Jr. The senior Fry, unable to be interviewed because of illness, responded on September 7, 1979, to specific questions submitted by the writer of this report.

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Survey  
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PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The sturdy central tower is suggestive of Philadelphia's Independence Hall. The overall composition and the interior and exterior details are derived from the Georgian style.
2. Condition of fabric: The building has been maintained excellently on both the interior and the exterior. The east side will be greatly altered, however, when the new addition to the library is completed.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: The library is 218'-4" across the front and rear by 108'-0" in depth.

The front facade has a three-story central portion, with five bays on each side of the entrance. On each side of the central portion is a two-story wing, two bays wide. The front and rear walls of these wings project outward from the central portion, and their gable ends face the front and the rear.

The brickwork of the front facade is accented by the lavish use of limestone trim, including quoins on the two wings and on either side of the entrance (to give the effect of a pavilion or of a base for the tower), a belt course, a wide modillioned cornice between the second and third floors, a narrower cornice at the roof line, and a round window with swags in each of the triangular gable ends of the two wings.

The most striking feature of the front facade is the 165 foot high tower. The three floors of the central portion of the building form the base of the tower. Above the roofline, the tower itself is divided into three parts:

- a. a square brick base, 24' high, with one window on each side. It is topped by a limestone cornice with two limestone finials at each corner corresponding to the brick pilasters below.
- b. a limestone clock room area, 26' high. A clock faces each direction. A pilaster is placed to the corners off each side. The limestone cornice is topped by a limestone parapet with vase-turned balusters. Limestone finials are at each corner.

- c. an octagonal cupola, 25' high. Round-topped windows are set between pilasters. The cupola is topped by a copper roof, on top of which is a smaller octagonal open-sided lantern. These two parts are an additional 14'-5" tall.

The tower is topped by a tall weather vane.

The east and west elevations are similar to each other. Each is two stories in height and nine bays wide. The west side has an entrance door in the center.

The south elevation resembles the main facade. The central portion, however, is seventeen bays wide, including a pavilion with five bays. The triangular pediment of the pavilion has a limestone panel of festoons and ribbons. There are six dormers with hipped roofs.

- 2. Foundations: Granite.
- 3. Wall construction: Below the first floor window sills is a four foot high limestone base. Between this and the foundation is a nine inch water table. The remainder of the walls is brick laid in Flemish bond.
- 4. Structural system: Structural steel and load-bearing walls.
- 5. Chimneys: Two chimneys are a part of the stepped gable of both ends of the central portion.
- 6. Openings:
  - a. Doorways: The main entrance has a pair of recessed double doors, 7' by 8'-6", over which is a leaded glass fan light. The limestone frontispiece has a pair of engaged Roman Doric columns on either side. The surmounting cornice has the incised inscription "Founders Library" between groups of triglyphs, metopes, and vases. Resting directly on top of the doorway cornice is a Palladian window.

On the west side is a recessed double-door entrance. The recess is framed by a limestone frontispiece with a side-by-side pilaster and column on either side of the recess, and a triangular pediment above.

- b. Windows: The most distinctive windows are the Palladian window and the triple window above the entrance doorway.

All of the other windows are double hung, their height varying on each of the three floors. The second floor windows are the tallest; those on the front of the central portion are round-arched, while those on the rear have flat arches. The second floor windows of both the central portion and of the wings have limestone keystones.

- 7. Roof: The central portion has a flat-topped gable roof. The visible parts are slate. The two wings have slate covered gable roofs.
- 8. Other features: A wrought iron railing surrounds the basement light wells.

On the south facade is a marble plaque with handsome surrounding decorative work. This, combined with a granite seat beneath, is a substitute for a Georgian doorway in the center of the pavilion. The plaque has an incised script inscription, "Books are voices from past ages ...Enter thou into this company and seek Truth." Fluted pilasters with Ionic capitals, set on pedestals, frame the plaque.

#### C. Description of Interior:

##### 1. Floor plans:

- a. Sub-basement: (The blueprints refer to this as the basement). This is located beneath the east wing and contains the mechanical and electrical equipment rooms, janitor's supply room, and janitor's locker and toilet facilities.
- b. Basement: (The blueprints refer to this as the ground floor.) A hall runs east and west through the central portion, with an outside exit at the west end. On the north side of the central portion were originally two seminar rooms, a map room, a library instruction room, and men's and women's rooms. In the west wing originally was the archives room and vault, photostat room, and a work room. The east wing had five seminar rooms, and a staff lounge and men's room.

The first level of seven stacks is located on the south side of the central portion. The other stacks do not always correspond to floor levels above.



- c. First floor: The entrance vestibule opens into a large lobby. Immediately to the right are doors leading into the "Browsing Room." A hallway runs westward off the lobby, at the end of which is an outside exit. On the north side of the hallway doors lead into the Browsing Room, and near the end of the hall is a lecture room. On the south side of the hallway is the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center suite of rooms.

Another hallway runs eastward off the lobby. At the end of this hallway is the Howard University Museum which occupies the east wing space that formerly was a large reading room. This room has been named the Dorothy B. Porter Room in honor of the long-time director of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center. On the north side of the hallway is the room containing the Pollack Theatre Collection.

- d. Second floor: Two sets of stairs lead into the large card catalogue room in the center of the second floor. On the south side of this room is the charge desk. Three sets of doors open into the Main Reference and Reading Room suite of three rooms on the building's north side. The rooms are separated by wide arches with paneled soffits. Fireplaces are at each end of the suite.

The entire east wing is devoted to use as a periodical room. The west wing contains the rare book room that was originally described as a "Treasure Room" with fireplace; offices for the Librarian, Assistant Librarian, and secretary, and staff women's lounge and rest room.

- e. Third floor: On the front of the central portion of the third floor is a suite of three rooms that were originally the graduate study rooms, but now house the Bernard B. Fall Collection.

On either side of the stacks is a group of faculty study rooms, some of which receive light from a light court.

The attics of the two wings are reached by doors at the end of the main corridor.

2. Stairways: The principal stairway starts from the center of the south side of the entrance lobby. At the top of a flight of nine broad steps is a landing. Here the stairway divides to the right and to the left into L-shaped flights.

Stairways running from the basement to the third floor are located near both wings.

3. Wall and ceiling finish: In most areas the walls and ceilings are plastered. In some of the rooms, such as the card catalogue room, the Moorland-Spingarn Room, the Browsing Room, and the Main Reference/Reading Room, much of the wall area is covered with built-in book shelves or panelling of white oak. The acoustical ceilings of many of these rooms were an original feature. The Periodical Room and the Card Catalogue Room have vaulted ceilings.
4. Flooring: A variety of floorings was used. Asphalt tile was used in some rooms such as the seminar rooms and work rooms. A mixed black, yellow and white aggregate terrazzo was used in the hallways, toilet rooms and on the stairways. The Periodical Room and Main Reading Room had cork tile floors. Rubber tile was used in the Card Catalogue Room. Linoleum was used in most other spaces.
5. Openings: A variety of doors were used: single, double, multi-panelled, partly glazed, wood and hollow metal, and combinations of the foregoing. Leather and studded doors are between the Main Reading-Reference Room and the Periodical Room.
6. Decorative features: The entrance vestibule has imitation travertine walls and door trim. On the east wall, set in an architectural frame, is a bronze plaque honoring the University founders.

The focal point of the entrance lobby is a portrait of General Oliver O. Howard located in a lighted niche in the panelled wall of the stair landing.

Woodwork in most of the principal rooms is light colored oak. Many of the rooms have raised molding panelling interspersed among the built in book shelves. Since neither the shelves nor the panelling usually reach ceiling height, there is convenient space for placing statuary or hanging paintings. However, the lobby panelling and fluted pilasters with their egg and dart capitals reach ceiling height.

The first and second floor hallways have raised molding panelled wainscoting.

Fireplaces, all of them false, abound. The Browsing Room, The Treasure Room, and the Moorland-Spingarn Room each have a fireplace. Both the Main Reference/Reading Room and the old third-floor Graduate Study Room each have two fireplaces. Particularly noteworthy are the two matched mantelpieces. In the center of a wide ogee molding that holds the shelf is a panel with a carved oak owl, oak leaves, and acorns. The overmantel has a tall panel. A triangular pediment, with a foliated design in its center, is supported by Ionic capped pilasters that reach uninterrupted to the floor. Three-light candelabra are set on each of the pilasters. The frieze beneath the pediment has an incised inscription reading "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free," while the inscription on the other mantel reads "The noblest mind the best contentment has." Other decorative features of the Main Reading/Reference Room are the beamed ceiling with smaller cross beams and the pilasters that are a part of the Palladian window composition.

Another example of the decorative detail of the building is the triangular pediments over the doors of the Periodical Room and the Card Catalogue Room.

- D. Site: Founders Library faces due north and is sited in the southern portion of the flat, elevated, and open campus courtyard. The campus slopes sharply downward from the rear of the Library. The elevated location of the Library gives splendid views of the city.

Buildings in a variety of styles surround the Library. Some, such as Douglass Hall, have similar Georgian styling. Close to Founders, however, is the picturesque brick and shingle chapel. The newer buildings have plain exteriors. Many of them were designed by Hilyard R. Robinson (See HABS No. DC-360) who felt that their architectural simplicity was both architecturally appropriate to their era and in sympathy with the more traditional buildings of the campus.

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